

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 23 June 2023
7.00pm

Supported by The Woolbeding Charity

Ema Nikolovska mezzo-soprano
Jonathan Ware piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Ständchen Op. 106 No. 1 (c.1888)

Der Gang zum Liebchen Op. 48 No. 1 (1859-62)

Lerchengesang Op. 70 No. 2 (1877)

Über die Heide Op. 86 No. 4 (c.1877)

Sapphische Ode Op. 94 No. 4 (1883-4)

Botschaft Op. 47 No. 1 (by 1868)

Rita Strohl (1865-1941)

Roses dans la nuit from *12 chants de Bilitis* (by 1898)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

La flûte de Pan from *Chansons de Bilitis* (1897-8)

Rita Strohl

Le serment from *12 chants de Bilitis*

Claude Debussy

La chevelure from *Chansons de Bilitis*

Rita Strohl

Les remords from *12 chants de Bilitis*

Claude Debussy

Le tombeau des naïades from *Chansons de Bilitis*

Rita Strohl

La nuit from *12 chants de Bilitis*

Interval

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Kerner Lieder Op. 35 (1840)

Lust der Sturmnacht • Stirb, Lieb und Freud! •

Wanderlied • Erstes Grün •

Sehnsucht nach der Waldgegend •

Auf das Trinkglas eines verstorbenen Freundes •

Wanderung • Stille Liebe • Frage • Stille Tränen •

Wer machte dich so krank? • Alte Laute

Abendlied Op. 107 No. 6 (1851-2)

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The six **Brahms** songs were written between 1868 and 1888, all on texts by different poets. Brahms had an extensive, ever-expanding library, and was always on the hunt for new literary sources. He had a few long-standing favourite poets for song-writing, including Georg Friedrich Daumer ('Botschaft'), but he also leafed through unsolicited tomes sent to him by younger and lesser-known figures – this is how he came across Hans Schmidt's 'Sapphische Ode'. We also hear poems by the Biedermeier politician and salonier Franz Kugler, the celebrated realist Theodor Storm, the overlooked Alsace poet Karl Candidus and the Bohemian writer and translator Josef Wenzig, whose 'Der Gang zum Liebchen' inspired multiple settings by Brahms.

The opening pairing of 'Ständchen' and 'Der Gang zum Liebchen' takes us to two moonlit scenarios: the first a musical serenade with a sense of bright anticipation; the second, in the relative minor, darker and agitated – the moon sets as the song commences its strophic repeat. The ethereal, reflective piano basis for 'Lerchengesang' brings an idyllic stillness, above which the vocal line traces drifting contours around a narrow range, as if floating along a light spring breeze. The piano parts of 'Über die Heide' and 'Sapphische Ode' both use prominent off-beats, but while this lends an ominous, creeping quality to the former, in 'Sapphische Ode' it provides a comforting, gentle pulse. Here, Brahms uses a strophic form, which both enhances the sense of formal rigour followed by the poet, and allows us to enjoy twice the magisterial beauty of his music. The concluding 'Botschaft' sends a romantic message through a gentle breeze to the cheek of the beloved – though the piano part may feel more like a whirlwind in its rapid motion, excited almost to the point of frenzy.

While Schmidt's careful emulation of Sappho belonged to a group of poems titled 'in antiker Form' – making clear the motivation for his pastiche – the case of Pierre Louÿs's *Chansons de Bilitis* takes us to an extreme of 19th-century literary fascination with antiquity. Louÿs presented his 1895 volume as the first French translation of little-known poems by Bilitis, a near-contemporary of Sappho from Pamphylia. The poems are divided into three sections, roughly charting the course of Bilitis's life; their powerful imagery and explicit sexual content – including abundant lesbian eroticism – immediately caught the attention of *fin-de-siècle* readers, composers and artists. That Bilitis and her poems were actually an elaborate, meticulous work of fiction by Louÿs only added to their intrigue and ultimate cult status, and as the 20th Century progressed, the fictional Bilitis lent her name to various radical lesbian movements. The Strohl and Debussy settings we hear tonight are all drawn from the first section, *Bucoliques en Pamphylie*, and the selection includes naive romance and sexual frisson before following the dark turn taken towards the conclusion of Part 1: Bilitis is raped by her first (male) love, and the pastoral landscape is symbolically dissolved with the death of Bilitis's beloved nymphs and satyrs.

The Breton composer **Rita Strohl** was a close contemporary of Debussy and frequented similar Parisian circles until she abruptly left the city in 1905. Like many of her peers, Strohl developed keen interests in the ancient world – she wrote operas on Celtic, Christian and Hindu themes – and also pursued interests in mysticism and theosophy. Her *12 Chants de Bilitis* of 1898 were, for a time, popular in Paris and performed by famous mezzo-soprano Jane Bathori. **Debussy's** three *Chansons de Bilitis* of 1897 were immediately celebrated and remain among his best-loved songs, not least for their intricate text-setting and enchanting evocations of antiquity through the use of modes. The alternating selection of Strohl and Debussy here allows us to appreciate the early compositional reception of Louÿs's poems beyond the towering Debussy set.

Robert Schumann had set poems by Justinus Kerner as early as 1828, but he and Clara were freshly enchanted by the poet in 1840. This was a turbulent year for the couple, as they fought Friedrich Wieck's (Clara's father) bitter remonstrances against their marriage; it was also the year in which Robert produced much of his best-known song output. The *12 Gedichte von Justinus Kerner* were composed in the months after their eventual marriage in September, and entries in their joint domestic diary show indications of compositional progress alongside allusions to Clara's first pregnancy. Schumann referred to the songs as a *Liederreihe* ('song row') rather than a cycle: musical and narrative ideas recur, but there is less overarching unity than in other 1840 cycles. With the exception of 'Wanderlied' (No. 3) and 'Wanderung' (No. 7), which became popular standalone baritone songs, the set as a whole struggled to find a steady place in the performing repertoire until the mid-20th Century.

Many of the songs deal with archetypal Romantic themes of wandering, love and loss, reflected through the experience of nature. The second, the ballad-like 'Stirb, Lieb und Freud!', is by far the longest of the set, and once again we find evocations of older music, this time of the Christian church: it tells the story of a young woman taking holy vows and leaving the pleasures of her former life behind – and the protagonist heartbroken. As the set progresses, there are several short, austere songs which anticipate elements of the composer's later song-writing style, while the emotional climax is reached in the pairing of 'Stille Liebe' (No. 8) and 'Stille Tränen' (No. 10).

A gem of Schumann's later song output, 'Abendlied' is a setting of Gottfried Kinkel and ends the *6 Gesänge* Op. 107 (1851-2). A gently optimistic song that returns us to the realm of the night, Schumann's calm, chordal ending softens the sparse and pessimistic close of the *Kerner-Lieder*.

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